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SOME NEGLECTED ASPECTS OF THE WAR

A LECTURE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

OCTOBER 27, 1917

BY

(1253-1937)

SPENSER WILKINSON, M.A.

Fellow of All Souls College

Chichele Professor of Military History

President of the Manchester Tactical Society



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SOME NEGLECTED ASPECTS OF THE WAR

NOTHING brings men together like a common purpose. It is a stronger tie than most, and it abides. While I have been trying to order my thoughts that I might put them before you to-day, I seem to have been in the company of those with whom in the course of forty years I have been associated in the study of war and in the attempt to persuade our countrymen to attend, while there was time, to the conditions of national strength and security.

Those who thus visit me are my friends of the first days of the Oxford Kriegsspiel Club, before 1877, one of whom was Arthur Napier, whom you afterwards knew as Professor of English; my old regimental comrades, seven of whom in 1881 formed with me the Manchester Tactical Society (the three survivors are still members); General Sir William Gordon Cameron, the best instructor the Volunteers ever had, a great tactician; Colonel Charles Brackenbury, one of the first artillery officers of his day; Colonel Cooper King, the teacher of a generation of staff officers; Sir Frederick Maurice, the brilliant writer and advocate of the navy as well as of the army; Lord Roberts, whose companionship was an education; Sir Charles Dilke, the statesman of imperial defence, had he but had his opportunity;

Sir George Chesney, the most clear-sighted and large-minded of military administrators—all these passed away when their work was done. One companion of later years, Sir Foster Cunliffe, seems to have gone too soon, and his death has left me lonely. Many years ago it was my good fortune to be able in slight measure to help and encourage his early study of war; in after years I had the delight of seeing his extraordinary growth in power and in command of his subject. From the day I came to All Souls College his judgement was my stay, his friendship my support. I have recently been permitted to read the manuscript of the lectures which he gave in the University; lectures in which, if it should prove possible to publish them, you will find a breadth of view, a grasp of the nature of war, and an insight into the mainsprings of action, unsurpassed—perhaps unequalled—in English military literature. By natural gifts and educational opportunities Cunliffe was on a higher intellectual plane than all but a very few officers of the army. His study of modern war was unusually wide and deep. He seemed marked out by his qualifications for counsel and command. Yet he fell in the discharge of his duty as a regimental officer. On June 2 I stood by his grave in a little roadside cemetery in front of Albert. Surely, I felt,

This is the happy Warrior; this is He
That every man in arms should wish to be.

Will you not to-day for a time make yourselves the companions of these men and of the purpose by which they were inspired? Their inspiration was England, their purpose Victory.

You may rightly say that Victory is the object of our admirals and sailors, of our generals and soldiers. But

they require to be sustained by the courage and faith of those of us who are at home. And from the Government at home, which depends upon our support, must come their guidance and direction. The 'advised head' at home is as necessary as 'the armed hand' abroad, and we must do all that we can to support the Government in its duty of thinking out the War, of seeing it steadfastly as a whole, and of standing in good and bad times by the resolves it has made. There is no finer quality of a leader than steadfastness, the strength to abide by his idea. That is a nation's quality also. But to be able to abide by our idea we must have a true idea to start with.

In war there is always a danger from untrue ideas. A war is like a great upheaval of nature, a tremendous disturbance, and the awe of great events not only stirs us to the depth of our being, but renders us liable to be carried away by impulses, rumours, opinions, and guesses. Especially men's finer feelings often lead them astray. A great deal has been said about the cause for which we are fighting. A good cause is something to fight for, but it is not the cause that can give us the victory; on the contrary, it is we who must fight to gain victory for the cause.

I have heard men, considered to be wise, declare that this is a war for democracy—for a form of government. I think it nearer the truth to say that war is a test of government, and that this war is the test of democratic governments, a trial of their efficiency. Meanwhile the first effect of the War in England has hardly been to make our mode of government more democratic, for we have set up a Long Parliament, a Committee of Public Safety, and something very like a dictatorship, and all these things men gladly accept

because we hope they will give us leadership and strength for the fight.

Again, it has been said that we have no quarrel with the German people, but only with the Emperor and the military caste. But the German people is heart and soul in this war along with the Emperor and the military caste. It is a war of nations, and nations that are to win must have governments that understand the conditions of victory.

So much by way of protest against misleading words and phrases.

Now let me put before you the picture of this war as it was sketched nearly a century ago by the critical effort made to understand the last great European War. A war, said these thinkers, is a conflict of purposes between two States or groups of States, taking the shape of a clash of forces that work by mutual destruction until one side has overthrown the other, or until in the exhaustion of both a compromise is reached and the issue postponed. Yet there was a contrast between the older wars and the great war they had passed through. What accounted for the difference? Why was the play of force in the earlier wars so capricious, so little like the conflicts of the elements of nature, and why had it been so terrific in the later age?

Because in the earlier wars the State had been the affair of a class; the mass of the people were little interested in it or in them. The danger was limited, the issues were small, and kings and governments could venture to play with the fire. A command might be given to a great lady's favourite, to a popular pet, to a politician who had a fancy for adventure. An army might be ordered to move for reasons of domestic policy. There was no supreme risk incurred; no one thought

of overthrowing States. It was only a half-serious business. But the French Revolution nationalized the State, and the nation made war in earnest. The other States were compelled to follow suit, and the collision of forces ceased to be governed by whims; the forces were directed according to the laws of force.

The inference was that when the issue should appeal to the mass of a people, should come home to every man as something nearly touching himself, a nation would turn its men into soldiers and its wealth into weapons and would fight with all its might, reckless of suffering endured or inflicted. This energy of one side would arouse a similar energy on the other, and the war would become a terrific explosion of contending forces. Each side would aim at the overthrow of its adversary, and the triumph of one would be the ruin of the other. In such a war the play of chance would be small; the connexion between cause and effect would be close and consistent, and the governing laws would be those of dynamics, of which the first is the concentration of effort in time and space. In such a war it would be wise not to take the first step without having weighed all the possible consequences.

In this account you will recognize a true forecast of the War of to-day. At first sight it may not seem encouraging. For our statesmen and those of our Allies hardly foresaw this war and were not ready for it; they allowed themselves to be surprised. We were suffering from some of the weakness inherent in the democratic form of government.

You remember Plato's picture of the ship of State, in which the crew, the politicians, were quarrelling over the right to steer the ship, although none of them had learned navigation or believed that the art could be

acquired; each gang of them was trying to persuade the easygoing owner, the people, that no trained helmsman was necessary, that any one could steer a ship, and that their own particular set had the best claim to the tiller. Well, England was not quite in as bad a condition as that, for her political leaders were sincerely devoted to her. So soon as the storm came the crew let drop their squabbles and worked manfully together. But there was still a mistrust of knowledge, a belief that it was not required for guiding the helm of State. None of the men who had mastered the higher parts of war were taken into the counsels of the Government. An army was, as we now know, thrown away by an impulsive minister without regard to the carefully prepared and competent adverse opinions which were on record at the War Office, but were ignored.

That is the dark side of the picture. But there is a bright side. The thinkers whom I have already quoted held that when a nation at war is in earnest, when the motives appeal to the mass of the people, not only will the national resources be freely thrown into the war, but sooner or later leadership adequate for the occasion will be evolved and means will be found for bringing the design and conduct of the operations into accord with the needs. The grandeur and scope of the plans will be equal to the magnitude of the crisis.

This is precisely what has been happening.

Early last year I ventured to tell you that while a war is always conducted by the Government, a government requires to be provided with a strategical conscience, a representative of the history, the theory, or the science

¹ In the *Nineteenth Century and After* for September, 1917, I attempted an analysis of the facts disclosed by the first report of the Dardanelles Commission.

of war, seated in its council chamber, and to point out that an arrangement had just been made which promised to meet that need. It was on January 27, 1916, that the Order in Council was issued by which the Chief of the Imperial General Staff was made responsible for the issue of the orders of the Government in regard to the military operations.

You will have observed that from that time on the operations of the army have had a new character. Its objectives have been systematically chosen and every objective aimed at has been attained. Every witness tells us that the improvement of the army in every respect has been little short of wonderful. That was the impression left upon my own mind by the visit in which in the spring I had the honour of being a guest of the Head-quarters Staff in France.

But it is not only in the military direction and management that the nation is showing itself in earnest. The mistrust of the competent man, the man who is the master of his branch of work, is giving way: we are beginning to have faith in knowledge and think of putting the right man in the right place. Whereas the orthodox doctrine of the politicians for a whole century has been that any member of Parliament was fit to become the head of any department of Government without any previous training or any acquaintance with the business done in the department, we have lately seen the appointment of two ministers on grounds that were thought absurd and impossible by the statesmen of twenty years ago. One man has been made Minister of Agriculture because he was believed to understand agriculture; another, for whose case there is some precedent, was made Minister of Education because he was believed to understand education. A few more

appointments like that and we shall be on the high road to efficiency, which is the way to victory.

In view of the principles which I have cited as to the nature and conditions of national war, and the improvements in our methods, of which I have given instances, may we not infer that the teaching of the history and of the theory of war accords with that of common sense to the effect that in war where there is a will there is a way? Perhaps if we turn to the naval war we shall find the strongest reasons for determination to win and abundant scope for the resolve to put knowledge in power. The object of naval warfare is to obtain what is called the Command of the Sea. That is strictly a technical term. It describes the state of things that would exist in a war between two Powers, of which one had a navy and the other had none. In that case the Power with a navy could do what it pleased at sea; its merchant ships and transports would be unhindered: while the Power without a navy would at sea be helpless; the sea would be closed for it.

In a war between two Powers, each of which has a navy, the object of either navy is to destroy the other in order to have the command of the sea. In such a war until there has been a decisive battle—a battle in which one of the two navies is crippled—there is no command of the sea, and though the stronger navy may act as though it had command, it does so subject to the probability that the enemy may at any moment challenge that position and offer decisive battle.

A small island forming an independent State can best defend itself in war by the destruction of the enemy's navy, for then no form of attack upon it is possible. But an insular State unable in war to gain command of the sea, or at any rate such a State in case an adversary

should gain that command, would be unable to maintain its independence, unless it were entirely self-supporting. It could at any time be reduced by invasion or by blockade or by both together.

These considerations led me many years ago to some conclusions about British policy, which I submit to you because, as it happens, they had an influence on the policy of Germany. With your indulgence I will read passages from an essay which was published in 1894 :

‘The first consequence of the oneness of the sea is to give to the victor in naval warfare a power of universal extent without territorial limits. In other words, there is only one command of the sea. This power Great Britain by her insular nature and her proximity to Europe has been compelled to acquire. Without it she would always be liable to invasion by the army of whichever of her neighbours possessed it. She is so much smaller in area and population than the neighbouring European Powers that she would, in the absence of the command of the sea, be unable to secure her independence ; for her army is limited in numbers, and a small country without great physical obstacles offers comparatively little help by which an inferior force can resist or delay its conquest. . . .

England’s command of the sea is not the result of her own unaided exertions nor of victories won by her in opposition to Europe. It is the outcome of a partnership between England on the one side and a combination of continental Powers, in which the membership has been changed from time to time, but of which the objects have always been the same,—the maintenance of the independence of States against some attempt at dominion. This seems to me the true interpretation of the balance of power, which in this sense is the most European of all European causes.

There must be a command of the sea ; and it is a prize that every nation covets. But every nation in Europe prefers that it should be held by England,

rather than by any other Power except herself. For England is hardly a great military Power; she is unlikely alone to possess armies that would endanger the existence of her neighbours; whilst if any continental Power acquired the command of the sea the others would be obliged to combine to wrest it from hands in which it could not but be a danger to each one of them.

Thus in a general view England's command of the sea serves two purposes which are inseparable from and complementary to one another: it means at once the independence of England, and that independence among continental nations which has been called the balance of power. . . .

The purpose of national life, the scope of national policy, cannot be deduced merely from the circumstances of the moment. It must flow of necessity from the nation's position in the world.

The mark of a nation is independence, the power to determine its own fate within the bounds of nature. A great nation must be able, upon occasion, if need be, to face the world in arms. This means for England that her national existence is bound up with the mastery of the sea.

What, then, are the conditions upon which England can command the sea?

It is evident that she must maintain and cherish the elements of a great naval force, a school of great sea captains, a hardy breed of sailors, and the ships and weapons of a powerful fleet. But what is to be the measure of this force? Must it be the equal of all other navies together, or of a combination of some of them? Is there a limit to the naval force that may be required, or does the national policy involve the maintenance of an Invincible Armada?

In past times it has been sufficient to keep a fleet superior to any other in the quality of its leaders and in the skill of its crews, but not so overwhelmingly strong in numbers as to exceed all other navies.

For the same conditions that compel England to assert the command of the sea make her a member of the European community, which is a combination of independencies. The self-defence of England has

almost always helped the self-defence of some other Power or Powers. The British navy has been at the same time the guardian of England's independence and the preserver of the equipoise between the States of Europe or between the groups into which they have been ranged. This dual character of England's action is founded in her geographical situation. The command of the sea exerted by England and the balance of power in Europe are two names for the same thing, two aspects of one activity, like the two faces of a coin.

Upon the command of the sea, of which the maintenance of the balance of power is the condition, rests the British Empire, the action of England in countries beyond the pale of European law and life, where an indigenous civilization has never developed, or has fallen into decay. In all such regions, wherever they border the sea, British influence during the greater part of the nineteenth century has been supreme. To some places English settlers have gone in such numbers as to create new colonies. Where there has been the need for defence against attacks by land, as in India and at the Cape, the British Government has been forced to extend its borders. But the possession of territory has not been sought. The British sea power has been used as the servant of mankind. The slave trade has been destroyed; piracy has been cleared off the sea; order has been kept on every shore, and the traders of all nations have enjoyed the equal protection of the British flag. Englishmen have had no monopoly, no special privilege. Where the British Government has been established, the native has been an object of as much solicitude as the European. . .

The two functions of the navy, to command the sea and to maintain the equilibrium of Europe, are the two pillars of an arch, of which the crown is the imperial task of bringing into the community of civilization races that have hitherto been strangers to its laws. Each part of this threefold mission is vital, and the bond between them cannot be severed.' ¹

¹ *The Great Alternative*, pp. 146, 148, 149, 297-300.

For our present purpose, the passages I have read to you have this importance. They attracted the attention of the great General Staff of the Prussian army. A member of that staff, an officer of high rank and attainments, reviewed my essay in the organ which was read by the army. He called attention to my theory and said—in substance, his exact words are not at this moment accessible—‘This is the policy of England; this is the policy with which her friends and her enemies must reckon.’

I followed up my essay with another, of which the outcome was the Navy League, with a programme having as its first item to make the command of the sea the prime object of British policy and its second to insist upon the appointment of a naval strategist as First Sea Lord.

The Germans replied with a Navy League under Government auspices, which very soon counted its members by the hundred thousand.

Now let me read to you the language in which the German Government, through an inspired press, is appealing to its people for money to prosecute the war. Here is a translation of an article by Herr Lehmann of Bremen, published three weeks ago (Oct. 5, 1917) in the *Hamburgischer Korrespondent*:

‘Until the outbreak of war the German was unconscious of the strength which was latent in the united German Empire. He was like Parzival. Our enemies, especially England, perceived this dormant power sooner than Germany. England expected, by driving into the war the continental Powers which were Germany’s neighbours, to break the economic strength of Germany and her Allies, and at the same time to weaken Russia and France sufficiently so that then, as *Tertius Gaudens*, she might draw the usual benefit from this struggle as she has always done

since the Middle Ages, when she was fighting her next strongest rival. England as an island State has always held in her hand the balance of power in Europe, thanks to the folly of the continental Powers.

Since the Middle Ages, England's fleet, after overthrowing those of Spain, Holland, and France, and after stealing the Danish fleet in the middle of peace, controls the sea, and these ages stand under the sign of Britannia rules the waves.

The appearance of the submarine, the weapon beneath the waves, has doomed the sea power on the surface of the water to inactivity, and England's maritime intercourse with her Allies is more and more straitened from day to day. February 1, 1917, on which at last the unlimited submarine war was declared against England by way of reply to her hunger war against women and children, is a landmark in history and will be written down as such for all eternity. This has not yet been grasped in its full extent by our contemporaries. Since the birth of Christ, three great events have been the decisive points of the world's history. The first age embraces the period of the Roman Empire, ending with the destruction of the Roman Empire by the Germans. The second reached its turning-point with the discovery of America and the beginning of the English command of the sea, so to say, opening up of the whole world. The third age lasted till February 1, 1917, the day when England's command of the sea lost its power through the new technical means of the submarine.

We Germans must keep this before our eyes, and make clear to ourselves what an important task is laid upon our people to-day in the shape of the world's history. That task is to remove the evil which for four hundred years has conjured up all the wars in Europe, namely, England's command from her island of continental Europe and her playing of one continental Power against the other. It is to overthrow the power of England and then to devise ways and means of reconciling the peoples of the Continent and removing their jealousy of one another.

Conditions like that before the War, in which England coolly played with the weal and woe of the

peoples of Europe, must cease. The sea power and the pressure upon all nations, great and small, exercised by this cold-hearted, selfish English Government must be broken. Until then there can be no peace! Only the cessation of this lying, hypocritical, though seemingly democratic, but thoroughly imperialistic, English domination can guarantee permanent peace on the Continent. Let every man realize that February 1, 1917, is a turning-point in history. The duty of Germany and her Allies to themselves and the whole world is shown in the brazen letters of the world's history. It is to hold out and win, so that the unendurable English hegemony of the last hundred years and the unendurable English oppression of all nations may be broken.

But to gain the victory over England it is necessary that in the Seventh War Loan every German should do his duty.'

Observe the lies which Bremen and Hamburg utter. The German Government in 1914 perfectly understood the true rôle of England in Europe, and that if England played her part its plan for the conquest of Europe would be difficult of execution. But it believed that the British Government did not know its part and would not play it. That was, perhaps, not so very far from the truth. But the nation knew its part by instinct and meant that it should be played. Thereupon the German Government grew angry and lashed to fury the hatred of this country which it had been stirring up in its people ever since 1884.

England is represented not only as having conjured up and begun the War, but also as having used her navy as an instrument of oppression, especially to Germany.

There was a time, however, before 1884, when Bremen and Hamburg told the truth.

When, in 1883, the German Government asked the

Senates of Bremen and Hamburg to lay before it any complaints or desires in regard to the trade of these towns with West Africa, the Hamburg Senate reported that England, in all the treaties which she had made with the native chiefs for the suppression of the slave trade, had stipulated for free and unhindered trade; that this stipulation had never been framed for the exclusive benefit of Englishmen, and that most of the treaties expressly bargained that the privileges granted should be given to the 'subjects of the Queen of England and all European Powers friendly to her'. 'The German firms,' the report goes on to say, 'especially those established at Cameroons, gratefully recognize the ready goodwill with which the English consuls and English ships of war have often protected their interests with the same energy that they would have employed in the case of English firms. This was especially the case quite recently in regard to conflicts with the chiefs at Cameroons.'¹

I trust you will forgive me for these quotations. They give the real clash of purposes between Germany and England. You see that Germany aims at the destruction of England's navy and of her maritime power, and thereby at the end of Great Britain as an independent State. If she were to succeed she would be mistress of Europe and of the world—she aims at nothing less.

You will judge for yourselves whether any other course was or is open to us but to resist her at whatever cost, and whether there can be any security or safety for this country until Germany has been overpowered and disarmed.

Perhaps I need labour that point no farther; but

¹ *The Great Alternative*, p. 206.

from the opposition of purposes I should like to draw an inference. For us the War is a matter of life or death. For Germany defeat means disappointment, perhaps for a time an economical collapse, but it would not mean ruin, nor destruction. Germany can exist very well without becoming mistress of Europe. But for England the victory of Germany would be the end of her existence as an independent Great Power and the end of her Empire. The position of France is analogous to our own. The victory of Germany means the end of the independent States of Europe. Are not these good reasons why our will should be stronger than Germany's? I believe that it is.

A second inference that you will draw is that any man who talks of peace without victory is not the friend but the enemy of England. The idea is possible only to a man who believes that we cannot win, who despairs of his country. The suggestion comes from the Pope, from Austria, and perhaps from some of those in England whose political thought comes from the Vatican. Let us beware of them, and, above all, take care that they shall not be found in the entourage of the British Government. Men who despair of their country are not the best qualified to serve her.

The navy, it seems to me, offers the best field for the further development of the principle, on which efficiency depends, of knowledge in power. Its task is of immeasurable importance; the fate not only of England but of the world hangs upon its accomplishment. Yet it is of infinite difficulty, for to-day the sea is not commanded by vessels running only on its surface; the depths too must be controlled, and probably the air also.

In my judgement the War should be conducted as

a whole by a single minister, either the Prime Minister or a minister acting under his immediate supervision, chosen for his grasp of the nature and principles of war. He should co-ordinate the operations by sea or land and in the air. But the action of each service should be directed by its own strategist. For the army the strategist is the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. For the navy the proper director would be the First Sea Lord, who should be the best strategist the navy can find, and should be not the subordinate but the colleague of the naval administrator. I see no reason for having a First Lord except as the administrative head, and every reason for not giving him authority over the strategist. He should work to the strategist's requirements, and there should be no intermediary between the strategist and the head of the Government or General Director of the War. With regard to the direction of the armies I expressed my view, and that I believe of all the strategists, when I addressed you last year, and the principles, of which I then gave a full account, apply equally to the management of the navy. I believe that along these general lines, as the nation's purpose grows, the process of organization for the fight will go forward.

Much has been accomplished. Nothing could be finer than the courage, the endurance, and the skill of the officers and men of the navy. But our admiration of them must not blind us to the skill and perseverance of the enemy. His use of the submarine has been a surprise, of which the advantage has been gained not by skill but by ruthlessness, for the Germans did not invent the submarine; their discovery is only that they can use it against non-combatants. By so doing they throw down to us a twofold challenge: to our wits to

devise means of fighting these craft, and to our souls, for we have to decide whether we will in return attack their non-combatants. They proclaim that their Germany is above all else, above even the ideal of a common humanity. They say that their attack on women and children constitutes reprisals for our blockade, which threatens to starve their women and children. These are questions which we have to answer. They have come to me, as to you, as a surprise.

For myself I can only say in reply, that I despair neither of our beating the submarines nor of England's will to stand for the manliness of mankind. Do the Germans by killing women and children of ours strike terror into us? They simply steel our hearts to fight them. But if they destroyed our navy or our army we should be helpless against them. We have but to turn these propositions round to know what is the more effectual form of warfare. We should so aim our blows that if well delivered they will bring the adversary to his knees.

I have suggested that the path to victory lies in the unrelenting effort to perfect our organization; to see that our State develops hands for acting, eyes for seeing, ears for hearing, and a brain for thinking—that is exactly what is taking place. For victory is not won by army or navy alone; it must be the work of the whole nation. What we are doing in this way is precisely what the historical theory asserts that a nation in earnest in a war will do. Yet in one respect I think we might change our attitude with advantage. We talk of reconstruction after the War; I think we should be wiser to talk and to think of reconstruction during the War for the purpose of victory. Now is the time. Unless we win there will be nothing for us to recon-

struct, and how can we count on success unless we set our house in order for the effort?

Should we not be wiser to assume a long lasting war and to work patiently, than to act hastily in the belief that victory is near at hand?

I have been content to-day to fall back upon some of the lessons of the past. From what other source can we learn? You have no doubt heard the opinion, especially from regimental officers home from the front, that this war is like no other war, and that nothing is to be learned from earlier experience. There is an element of truth in that view, for what may be called the mechanical part of war is ever changing. With new weapons fresh tactics are required, and with better means of communication generalship has to modify the application of its principles. But, if the tools change, the men who handle them and are hurt by them do not, and the fight is a conflict not only of weapons but of spirits. It is with men and their qualities that the higher part of war has to deal; the moral and intellectual elements are those that most concern the statesman and the nation which he must lead. A war is a clash of wills and purposes before a bullet is fired.

This distinction between the two aspects of war was drawn by Napoleon, who wrote:

‘Tactics, evolutions, the science of the engineer and of artillery can be learned from treatises pretty much as geometry.’

That is the changing part, of which the history has only an antiquarian and technical interest.

‘But,’ he went on, ‘a knowledge of the high parts of war can be acquired only from the study of the history of the wars and battles of the great captains and from experience.’

That is the part with which the University is concerned, because the study belongs to the study of human life.

I have tried to put before you a glimpse of some of what Napoleon called the 'higher part' of war. I have thought that it would help and strengthen you to be reminded that the highest theory of war and the largest experience know of no motive power so strong as a nation's will to win or to perish. Before the War England was told, and half believed, that she was degenerate. The War has shown her that she is, as of old, the mother of heroes. Will she not prove worthy of them?

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